

Ferning Out of Season

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We started out November 26th, 1927, with car and trailer, an aggregate weight of three full tons. Rain overtook us the first night out, before a camp ground had been located in the darkness, and for a whole month it was a fight against rain, snow, sleet and cold. While in camp at Harper's Ferry four inches of snow and sleet fell. Imagine our surprise to find purple cliff brakes in all stages of growth on the face of a retaining wall along a side street, rubbing pedestrians' elbows as they passed!

The cliffs above would no doubt have been interesting to examine but the sun had already come out, the snow and ice were melting, and masses were slipping down the face of the wall, absolutely barring investigation.

No ferns were seen in any of the Virginia Caverns visited but it was interesting to note that often where 100- or 200-watt or larger electric lamps with reflectors had been installed close to the clay-covered formations, the heat and light of the lamps, combined with the natural moisture present, had favored low forms of plant life, an inch or so high, over a space the size of a dinner plate, pale green. Three or four kinds may be seen but none were identified. As the lights are on but a few minutes while visitors are passing, the results are astonishing.

Our next thrill was in finding venus-hair ferns on the outer walls of Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida, in great quantities, though not growing thriftily. Most unusual of all was to find that it grew much finer on the inner walls of rooms of this coquina-rock-built fortress. The fort consists of a large inner court, around which are chambers approximately thirty feet deep, all facing the court, each with one door and usually a window on

each side of the door, with prison-like gratings only allowing free circulation of air and a dim light. These chambers are possibly sixteen feet high with rock arched ceilings and all have a history. One, for instance, was Osceola's cell. In a number of these rooms the venus-hair fern had found a congenial home, even growing from seams in the wall at the extreme rear end and along the sides as well as nearer the door. (See Fig. 4.)

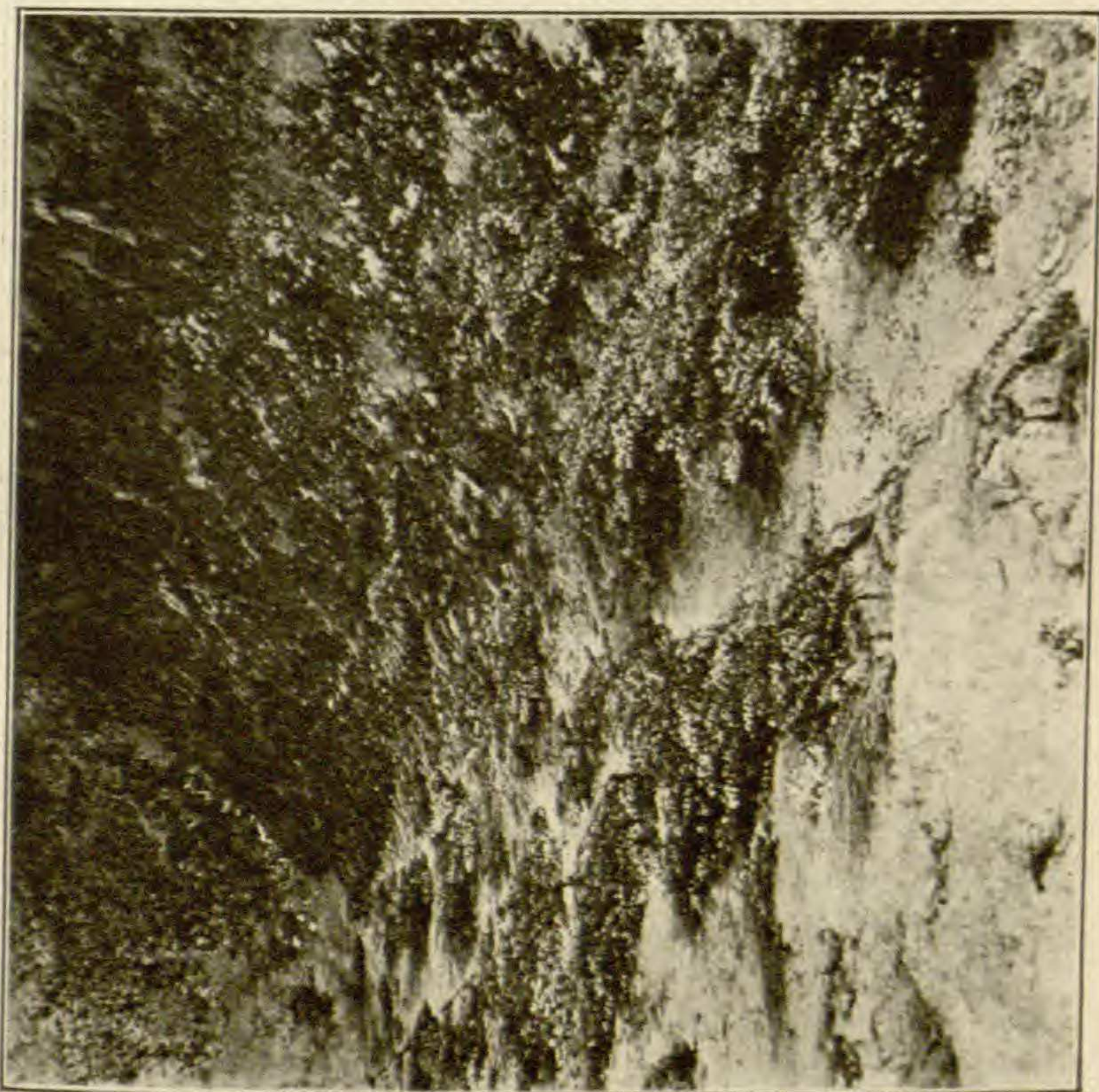
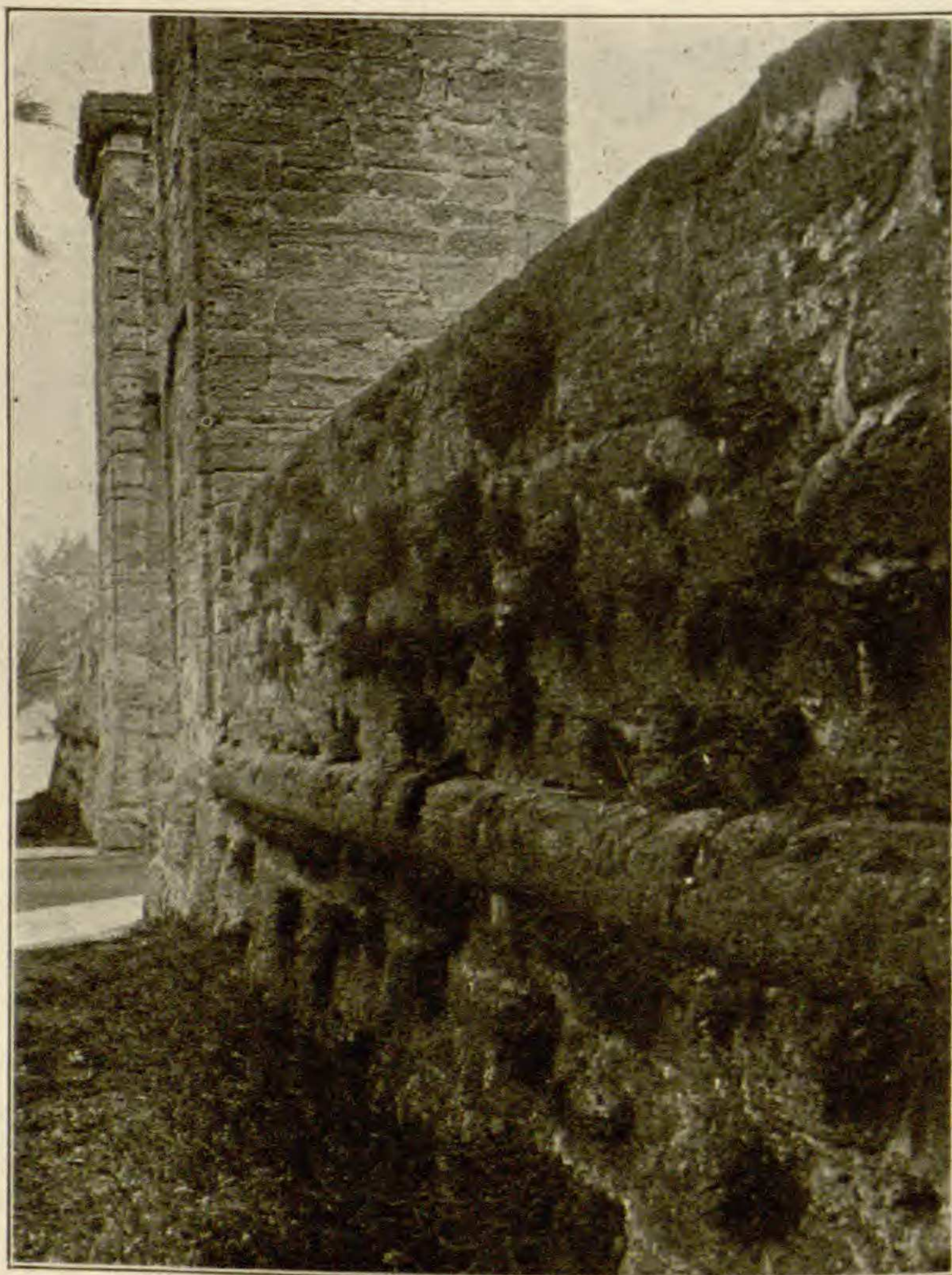


FIG. 4

The place had had repairs made upon the flat roof overhead and the rooms fumigated, and, as a result, the ferns had suffered, much to the custodian's sorrow. He thought it was the fumigation but I suggested that the repairs of tar and cement overhead had probably cut off the moisture from filtering down through the porous



VENUS-HAIR ON THE OLD CITY GATES, ST. AUGUSTINE

rock and that drilling a hole to allow a little water to reach them would restore growth. They had enjoyed shade, moisture and protection from the occasional frosts, an ideal home.

After some delay and difficulty, permission was obtained to make flashlights of the ferns, but when the attempt was made, an accident put the kodak out of commission and the results were but partially successful.

The old Spanish gates to the city of St. Augustine are still standing, built of the same kind of rock as the fort and on the northern side the venus-hair also grows freely, close beside the modern paved highway where the city's visitors flash by, or perchance the languid native leans against them while chatting with his fellows. However, the colored loiterer would never harm the ferns, for he would surely be found on the southern or sunny side of the wall!

The fort is used by the local Historical Society with the Government's permission and capable guides show great numbers of visitors daily through without charge, although voluntary offerings are customary. Booths where postals, views and curios are sold are located near the entrance. Under the circumstances, it seems strange that these ferns have not been reported by some visitor before this.

Around Miami, Florida, I began to find ferns but on January 29th there was a frost, three-eighths of an inch of ice forming on our water pail, and all ferns were cut down.

A large drainage canal from near Royal Palm Park, south of Miami to the southern tip of the state, was dug out of shell rock, part of the rock being used for a road bed parallelling the canal, and the balance thrown up on the opposite bank. Several kinds of ferns have taken to this rock as ducks take to water.



THE AUTHOR AND THE LEATHER-FERNS. STERILE, LEFT; FERTILE, RIGHT

About ten miles from the gulf the leather fern grew very close to the roadway but mosquitoes made it almost impossible to do more than grab a specimen and run. Usually there was but one fertile frond and more often none but sterile. The latter sometimes were thirty inches across and not much over six feet tall. Fertile fronds are much narrower and may be much taller. Some found on our return north near Fort Pierce were nearly nine feet tall, but the choicest of all were found just north of Fort Myers on the west coast, which measured exactly ten feet eight inches in height. It was collected in a rain storm, under an umbrella, hip boots on, about a hundred feet off the main highway. Some have been reported twelve feet high. One measured four inches in circumference at the base of the stipe! Making photos on the spot would have necessitated an hour's labor with a scythe or machete. Being among them was much like being lost in a corn field. After emerging with specimens at one place, we were informed that a rattlesnake had been killed there very recently. (Never saw one, though, in Florida except at a snake farm.)

South of Tallahassee is said to be the largest spring in the world, discharging 370,000 gallons of water a minute, Wakulla Spring. Returning from a visit there, along a narrow woods road, a negro cabin was espied, the roof of which was almost wholly overgrown with the gray polypody fern, in vigorous condition. It had been noticed on live oak tree trunks, on the larger limbs, logs and palmetto trunks as well as on rocks, but these on the roof were the most unique and massive lot of all. It rambles over tree trunks, and, while frequently met with, was more often curled up and partially dry at the time of my visit.

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA



GRAY POLYPODY ON A CABIN ROOF